

College Guild
PO Box 6448 Brunswick, Maine 04011

Poetry Club

~ The Family of Man ~

Unit 8 of 8

The poems in this final unit are about life: love, fear, joy, loss, death. Some are told in the first person, some in the third person. Try to put yourself in the shoes of every character the poets are speaking about or through.

ROUGH

by Stephen Spender

*My parents kept me from children who were rough
Who threw words like stones and who wore torn clothes.
Their thighs showed through rags. They ran in the street
And climbed cliffs and stripped by the country streams.*

*I feared more than tigers their muscles like iron
Their jerking hands and their knees tight on my arms.
I feared the salt coarse pointing of those boys
Who copied my lisp behind me on the road.*

*They were lithe, they sprang out behind hedges
Like dogs to bark at my world. They threw mud
While I looked the other way, pretending to smile.
I longed to forgive them, but they never smiled.*

1. Give two reasons why the “rough” boys bullied the child. Why do you think “Rough” is a good title for this poem?
2. Why would the child have been able to forgive the bullies if they had only smiled?

ELSEST BROTHER

by W.D. Ehrhart

*On Friday nights in the dark in bed,
I lay awake sometimes for hours
imagining all the places
you had gone: dances, hayrides,
houses of friends where cool jazz
moaned from phonographs, dates in cars
with girls with breasts.
What was it like to be grown?
I never dared to ask.
Covers tucked up under my chin,*

*I listened hard for the front door,
afraid of your age and the creaking stairs.
Your footsteps tolled through the silent house
like the steps of an unapproachable giant.
I always wanted to tell you
I loved you,
but never did.*

*The years have narrowed
the years between us:
we've both been to college,
been through a war, been halfway around
the world and back, and everywhere
in between. I drink beer
the way I always imagined you drank it,
call on the phone to ask how you've been
and tell you about my life.
But every time I try to tell you
the only thing I've ever really
wanted you to know, giants stir
in the awesome dark, and I hear
the creaking of stairs.*

3. Why do you think it is so hard for the brother to tell his older sibling, "I love you"? From which specific lines or images did you draw your answer?
4. Write a poem about childhood from either a child's, parent's or teacher's perspective.

The following two poems describe two extremes in the world of a teenage girl. One is trapped in a dark life, the other filled with the joy of doing something she loves.

THE RUN AWAY

by Louis Osei Cotton

*By choice
By chance
By circumstance, on city streets
In dark doorways, quite discreet
A knowing glance,
A few
Words passed
The question asked,
From a two-bit room to the
Streets again,
Sweet sixteen come June....*

5. Why does Cotton use such an unusual format? How does it fit the subject?

THE BARREL RACERS

by John Yarbrough

*The gate opens and we sail through,
our ponytails flying.
Feeling her hungry slaps and spurs,
I stretch forward.
As we near the first striped barrel,
she draws back on the reins
and my hooves twist at right angles.
Then she digs in her heels,
taking us back up to full speed,
four eyes on the next barrel.
We flag past it in a tight turn;
one more barrel left now.
At sprinter's speed we start the swing
and lightly brush the standard.
It wobbles drunkenly but stands;
then I dig in my heels.
Racing ahead we head for home
and she stretches forward.
She eagerly pushes me on
through the gate at full gait,
and we disappear from the crowd,
Our ponytails flying.*

6. Yarbrough uses the voice of the horse in "Barrel Racers". Is this more or less effective than if it were written in the voice of the rider?

The following poem uses a single metaphor throughout. James Murphy tells of the journey that led him to prison.

TIGHTROPE

by James Murphy

*Each footstep carefully calculated,
I tread on the brink of calamity,
a paltry slip to a great fall.
Crowds don't gather below me,
only a few friends, some family,
soon all but a couple will flee,
so helpless, unable to watch any longer.
How did I possibly end up here?
I do recall some of the climb,
a crowded and noisy ascent,
now on the rope so quietly alone.*

7. Does Murphy's use of the metaphor give his readers a good sense of a life out of control? Explain.
8. "Tightrope" is a word with both a literal and metaphoric meaning. Why is it an appropriate title for this poem?

rites of passage

by Carlos Bellamy

*Poverty provokes pain in a child.
I grew up with my cousins. We clung
to one another like polar bear cubs
eager to explore the world. Only seven
stealing just to eat. Our grandfather,
a pastor, prophesied Hell for us delinquents.
We said we'd be alright with our fate
if only, in the end, we got to question
God and his answers made sense.*

*Sometimes, I wonder if my supervisor
Remembers the life I saved
(before she fired me)
The small boy. Being swallowed
By water. I dove in. Averting disaster.*

*In hindsight, I think love's like that.
Slipping under.
Not much of a splash.
No screams. No sounds.
Just silent panic.*

9. How does the first stanza of Bellamy's poem tie in to his thoughts about love?
10. Use a single metaphor to write a poem about love.

THE BEAN EATERS

by Gwendolyn Brooks

*They eat beans mostly, this old yellow pair.
Dinner is a casual affair.
Plain chipware on a plain and creaking wood,
Tin flatware.*

*Two who are Mostly Good.
Two who have lived their day,
But keep on putting on their clothes
And putting things away.*

*And remembering....
Remembering, with twinklings and twinges,*

*As they lean over the beans in their rented back room flat
is full of beads and receipts and dolls and cloths,
tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes.*

- 11. Does the picture Brooks paints with this poem show us a happy couple? Explain.
- 12. Imagine something they might be remembering with “twinklings” and something they remember with “twinges”.

SOUL

by Yassin Aref

*As they say,
when someone dies
you must open a window
to allow his soul
to get out, and
fly back to the sky.*

*I am wonder,
if I will die
in this prison cell
where there’s no window at all
then what will happen to my soul,
where it will go,
how it will fly?*

- 13. Write a poem about death in the voice of a young adult. Write a poem about death in the voice of an elderly person.
- 14. Write an original poem, one created specifically for this course, on the subject of your choosing.
- 15. What have you learned from these poems or these poets that you might want to apply to your own work?
- 16. Which poem is your favorite and why?

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes